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Trial on Pope's Shooting Reaches Decisive Phase

ROME, Feb. 2 — The eight-month-old trial of seven men accused of conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II in 1981 moved into its decisive stage this week, presenting the court with an array of difficult decisions.

Using interpreters, the court of two judges and six jurors has cross-examined witnesses and defendants in at least five languages and traveled to six countries, including Bulgaria, to question others.

But in the view of courtroom observers, the prosecution's case has been severely weakened by the often contradictory testimony of its chief witness, Mehmet Ali Agca, the Pope's convicted assailant. What little credibility he had, the observers say, was largely shattered by his bizarre public declarations, particularly his repeated assertions that he is Jesus Christ.

The 28-year-old Turk never budged under hours of cross-examination from his basic contention that the Bulgarians paid him and other Turks the equivalent of \$1.2 million to kill the Polish-born Pope. According to Mr. Agca, the attempt on John Paul's life was a Soviet-bloc effort to quiet a resurgence of religious sentiment in Eastern Europe that followed the Pope's election, and to dampen resistance to Communist rule in his homeland.

Question of 3 Bulgarians

But the key question facing the public prosecutor, Antonio Marini, when he begins his final plea this week is whether to seek the conviction of three Bulgarian citizens, two of them being tried in absentia, for their suspected role in the Pope's shooting.

Government and court officials say the decision will be based solely on the merits of the case. But a conviction of the three Bulgarians would be very awkward for Italy, which is seeking to promote the thaw in East-West relations at a time of foreign policy complications in other areas, such as the Mediterranean basin.

The three Bulgarians are Sergei Ivanov Antonov, now 37, the former Rome station chief of the Bulgarian state airline and the only one of the three in Italian custody, and two former diplomats, Todor S. Aivasov, 42, and Lieut. Col. Zhelyo K. Vasilev, 44, whom Bulgaria refused to extradite after they returned home.

Mr. Marini has kept his intentions secret, but even an acquittal poses potential difficulties. Italian courts can convict a defendant, declare him innocent or declare the person acquitted "for lack of proof" if it cannot decide the relative merit of evidence pointing to both innocence and guilt. Most court observers feel that the prosecution will recommend acquittal for lack of evidence.

Such a move, they say, would have face-saving merit for Italian judicial procedure, which was evidently unable, despite five years of investigation, to confirm Mr. Agca's often contradictory claims. At the same time, it would pave the way for the release of Mr. Antonov, who has been in Italian custody for more than three years.

Bulgarian officials, however, say they want a full declaration of the Bulgarian defendants' innocence and would appeal anything less to a higher court. A declaration of innocence, in turn, could lead to subsequent charges against Mr. Agca for false testimony.

There was no indication what verdict the prosecution would recommend for the four Turks.

In October, a mysterious defendant in the case, Bekir Celenk, died of heart failure in a military prison near Ankara, Turkey. Mr. Celenk, 51, a reputed Turkish underworld leader, fled to Bulgaria in 1982 after Mr. Agca implicated him in a supposed conspiracy. Mr. Agca said Mr. Celenk had been his link with the Bulgarian secret services, meeting with him in a Sofia hotel in 1980 and channeling, or promising, \$1.2 million for the assassination of the Pope. The court hoped it could glean useful information from Mr. Celenk, but he died in several weeks after he was unexpectedly allowed to return to his native Turkey from Bulgaria.

Whether Mr. Agca will face subsequent charges of false testimony hinges largely on whether the court accepts the contention, renewed during the trial, that Western intelligence agencies somehow coached him to implicate Bulgaria.

Mobster Testifies

In June, a convicted Naples mobster turned state's witness, Giovanni Pandico, testified that he had been involved in meetings of Italian intelligence officials and Mr. Agca in the prison where the Turk was confined.

Bulgarian officials had long contended, with the support of their Soviet bloc allies, that the investigation and trial were Western plots to smear Communism.

Mr. Pandico's charges were denied by all the people he implicated, including former secret service officials and members of the prison staff, and he was unable to substantiate them under cross-examination. But the charge was kept alive when a former Italian secret service official, in jail in New York, repeated them.

The official, Francesco Pazienza, who was jailed last year and is awaiting extradition to Italy, said intelligence officials sought to enlist him in a plot to use Mr. Agca against the Bulgarians. Mr. Pazienza was questioned in New York by an Italian magistrate, and the interrogation transcripts were entered into the court record. But he often altered his account, and the court decided against sending one of its own officials to New York to hear him.